Exploring the Shores of the Neverland

The Case of James Matthew Barrie, Peter Pan and the Lost Boys

Helga Coulter

James Matthew Barrie (1860–1937) is best known as the creator of Peter Pan, ‘the boy who would never grow up’. Admired by many and knighted in 1913, he was for some, however, a controversial figure. This had to do with Barrie’s intense involvement with the five boys of the Llewelyn Davies family, who together with his own childhood experience, provided the inspiration for Peter Pan. The nature of Barrie’s relationship with these boys, ‘his boys’, gave rise to speculation in some quarters that he might have been a paedophile. This assumption has been questioned by many. Hence an attempt is made in this paper to explore Barrie’s life and creations, to weave together fact and fiction, in order to gain some psychoanalytic understanding of who Barrie was, both as a man and a sexual being.

While Freud was sitting at his desk in Vienna writing *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the celebrated writer James Matthew Barrie, had the habit of walking in London’s Kensington Gardens every afternoon with his St. Bernard dog. There the sight of two small and very attractive boys in red berets would catch his attention. The boys were George and Jack Llewelyn Davies accompanied by their nurse and their baby brother Peter. Their meeting was to change the lives of everyone concerned including the boys’ parents as well as result in the creation of a fictional character who has attained mythic status—Peter Pan.

The creation of Peter Pan, however, began much earlier in Barrie’s life. In fact, it began with a tragedy, with a death, when his older brother David, the fourth living child of the Barrie family fractured his skull on the eve of his fourteenth birthday while ice-skating with his friends.

James Matthew Barrie, the seventh living child was then six years old. He was a serious little boy and in comparison with his tall, athletic and charming brother David, something of a disappointment. Unlike his brother David, James showed no particular academic promise nor did he possess his brother’s good looks. He was small for his age, rather squat, with a head too large
for his body.

James Barrie had been forever living in the shadow of his brother David, the Golden Boy who was doted on by his mother, Margaret Ogilvy. For her, the death of David was a catastrophe beyond belief and she never fully recovered from it. Having had to mourn two infant deaths prior to David's birth and mostly being physically weak and frail she had often been at the brink of death prior to the loss of David. In short, Margaret Ogilvy had been a constant worry to her family. Her cough and headaches had frightened all of them for years but after David's death she became a semi-invalid calling for pity and everyone's care until her death at the age of 76.

But this event was also a catastrophe for the six year old James Barrie. Overcome with severe depression his mother took to bed and no longer cared for anyone. Barrie in his book Margaret Ogilvy (Barrie, 1925 [1896]) describes what happened:

... I peeped in many times at the door and then went to the stair and sat on it and sobbed... My sister came to me with a very anxious face and wringing her hands she told me to go to my mother and to tell her that she still had another boy. I went in excitedly, but the room was dark and when I heard the door shut and no sound come from the bed I was afraid and I stood still. I suppose I was breathing hard, or perhaps I was crying, for after a time I heard a listless voice that had never been listless before say, 'Is that you?'. I think the tone hurt me, for I made no answer, and then the voice said more anxiously 'Is that you?' again. I thought it was the dead boy she was speaking to, and said in a little lonely voice, 'No, it's not him, it's just me'.

(pp. 9–10)

Barrie succeeded in getting his mother's attention and thus encouraged he made every effort possible to enliven her and to make her forget David. He spoke of himself as being an odd little figure and that his anxiety to brighten her gave his face a strained look and put a tremor into his jokes.

Over time his desperate efforts to enliven his mother changed into an

intense desire to become so like David that even my mother should not see the difference... He (David) had such a cheery way of whistling, she (mother) told me, it had always brightened her at her work to hear him whistling, and when he whistled he stood with his legs apart, and his hands in his pockets of his knickerbockers

(Barrie, 1925 [1896], pp. 12–13).

With these thoughts in mind, he put on the dead boy's clothes and pretended to his mother that he was David. This image of the whistling boy, standing with his legs apart would many years later be made immortal in the statue of Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens, a statue for which the boy Michael Llewelyn Davies, aged six, was to be the model. Margaret Ogilvy lived for another 29 years after David's death but Barrie noted that

he had not made her forget the bit of her that was dead; in those nine-and-twenty years he (David) was not removed one day farther from her.

(Barrie, 1925 [1896], p. 14)

In Barrie's mind his brother David remained forever the boy of thirteen, a Peter Pan, timeless and forever young, whilst he needed to develop into adulthood, something he dreaded and struggled
with all his life, making him say in Margaret Ogilvy

The horror of my boyhood was that I knew a time would come when I also must give up the games, and how it was to be done I saw not …

This agony continued to return to him in dreams. Many years later he wrote: ‘nothing that happens after we are twelve matters much’ thus giving the impression that the end of boyhood is the end of life worth living. At age 62 he wrote with astonishment

It is as if long after writing Peter Pan its true meaning comes to me; desperate attempt to grow up, but can’t

James Matthew Barrie was described as a shy and tiny man of not much over five foot. He was unpredictable in his moods and could vacillate between being a sparkling and fascinating raconteur and being a man wrapped up unreachably in his own silence; a man who habitually sank into dark depression, a man who hardly ever smiled and whose mood swings scared those who did not know him well (Asquith, 1954). One wonders about his internal world, about the nature of his internal relationships with his mother and his father and about what contributed to those troublesome feelings that made him later shy away from intimate relationships and what drew him to the Llewelyn Davies boys whom he described as

having violently rubbed together to create the spark for Peter Pan, the boy who would not grow up.
(Birkin, 1980, p. 119)

Although in his book Margaret Ogilvy he described his mother in a very loving but whimsical way the following personal account of his nightmares might give quite a different and more illuminating picture:

At age 27 he wrote the following:

When this horrid nightmare got hold of me, and how, I cannot say, but it has made me the most unfortunate of men. In my early boyhood it was a sheet that tried to choke me in the night … It had assumed shape later, leering, but fatally fascinating; it was never the same yet always recognisable. One of the horrors of my dream was that I knew how it would come each time, and from where. I do not recall it in my childhood, but they tell me that, asleep in my cot, I would fling my arms about wildly as if fighting a ghost. It would seem that my nightmare was with me even then, though perhaps only as a shapeless mass that a too lively imagination was soon to resolve into a woman. My weird dream never varies now. Always I see myself being married, and then I wake up with the scream of a lost soul, clammy and shivering …
(Birkin, 1980, p. 36)

One can perhaps speculate that Barrie is recalling here a need to ward off a mother whom he felt to be threatening, intrusive and overwhelming, quite in contrast to the one he so idealized in his book Margaret Ogilvy. In all of his writings I could not find one critical remark about his mother.

His father (David Barrie), also a David, was seemingly absent and appears to have had little influence on his son’s character and development. He is scarcely mentioned in any of Barrie’s autobiographical writings, beyond a cursory reference to him in Margaret Ogilvy as ‘a man I am
very proud to be able to call my father’. Barrie never mentioned his father’s name in his writings, creating an impression of a father that was nameless, shapeless, a man without a presence. Thus Barrie seems to have been left to an all female household with his five sisters. (His only brother Alexander, the eldest of the eight Barrie children who survived infancy, had left before David’s death.)

Uncontained and burdened like this it is therefore perhaps no surprise that psychosomatic symptoms plagued Barrie throughout his life. Like his mother he suffered from headaches, a permanent cough which started the very day he was breaking the news of his engagement to his mother (on his arrival he was almost immediately struck down with pleurisy and pneumonia) and like Margaret Ogilvy he suffered from insomnia until his death at 77.

However, it was noted that he did manage to communicate something different from his whimsical sentimentality. There existed a reversed side, a form of genial sadism. The critic George Black wrote:

> It is perhaps the most puzzling thing about Barrie from first to last that the expert toucher of emotions, the weaver of charmingly whimsical webs, the delight of the nurseries, had in all his dealings as a writer with such topics as death and sepulture and grief and suffering the way of a sadist
> (Birkin, 1980, p. 29)

### Sexuality

Speculations about a darker side to Barrie have not only been expressed by Black but also by others. Andrew Birkin in his book *J.M. Barrie and the Lost Boys* (1980) writes about doubts concerning Barrie’s sexuality. In some quarters it has been assumed that Barrie was a paedophile (p. 13). Since Barry is still an enigma today and his sexuality is open to speculation I would like to make an attempt in this paper to understand who he might have been as a man and a sexual being. In doing so, however, and given the fact that he is not a patient on the couch, I will draw inferences from his work and his notebooks as well as biographical and autobiographical data. I am mindful here about the use of projective identification in one of the many forms of artistic activity of which literature is one, where the imagination has transformed an internal situation into something that is then available to others for exploration.

In one of his many notebooks Barrie writes:

> Six feet three inches … If I had really grown to this it would have made a great difference in my life. I would not have bothered turning out reels of printed matter. My one aim would have been to become a favourite of the ladies …
> (Birkin, 1980, p. 32)

He was not much over five foot—but was that really the reason why he had difficulties with having a married life? The woman he would marry in 1894 (and whom he would later divorce) the actress Mary Ansell was only five foot herself. His dreams as reported earlier in this paper and his notebook entries suggest that he knew he was unsuited to married life but despite his
hauntingly vivid nightmares reported earlier he proposed to Mary Ansell. Two days before the wedding the 34 year old Barrie had jotted down in one of his notebooks these revealing statements:

> our love has brought me nothing but misery
> boy all nerves. You are very ignorant'
> how? Must we instruct you in the mysteries of love-making?

And in another notebook there is this entry:

> perhaps the curse of his life that he never ‘had a woman’
(Birkin, 1980, p. 38)

Mary Ansell confided to a friend that the honeymoon had been a shock to her and that her husband’s jest to an American interviewer

that he (Barrie) quite intended to marry, if only to have the convenience of using his wife’s hairpins to clean his pipes
(Birkin, 1980, p. 39)

was not a joke. What Mary to her dismay discovered was a husband who in her words was ‘not a man’.

Barrie’s impotence was much rumoured in his lifetime; someone quite sarcastically dubbed him ‘the boy who couldn’t go up’. Mary Ansell, more sympathetically, put it this way:

> J.M.’s tragedy was that he knew that as a man he was a failure and that love in the fullest sense could never be felt by him or experienced, and it was this knowledge that led to his sentimental philanderings. One could almost hear him, like Peter Pan, crowing triumphantly, but his heart was sick all the time
(Birkin, 1980, p. 180)

The Llewelyn Davies Family

Mary desperately wanted to have children, yet was left with little alternative but to direct her maternal instincts towards their St. Bernard dog. For Barrie, however, there was a very real alternative to own children: other people's children. And like his creation Peter Pan, the boy who stole the Darling family's children, Wendy, John and Michael he lodged himself into the Llewelyn Davies family and their five boys. In his book Peter and Wendy (Barrie, 1991 [1911]) he writes ‘There never was a simpler happier family until the coming of Peter Pan’. Doubtless he was well aware that, in describing the Darling family thus, he was alluding, with shades of perverse humour, to his own intrusion into the lives of the Llewelyn Davies family, on whom the Darlings were based.

By pure chance Arthur Llewelyn Davies and his wife Sylvia finally met Barrie at a New Year's Eve dinner party on December 31st, 1897 when they realized that the man next to them at the table was the man who held such fascination for their sons in Kensington Gardens. This dinner party meeting echoes in Mr. Darling’s lament to his wife ‘if only I hadn’t accepted that invitation to
dine’ when they returned to find that their children have flown away to the Neverland with Peter Pan. It was shortly to become Arthur’s lament too. Arthur disliked Barrie, but tolerated his intrusion nevertheless. Fate would have it that despite Arthur’s attempt to create a distance between his family and Barrie by moving twenty-five miles away from Barrie’s doorstep in 1904, he would be forced to rely on Barrie’s generosity to ensure the survival of his family when he was dying in 1907 of a facial sarcoma that had disfigured and maimed his very attractive face. His wife Sylvia followed him three years later and Barrie adopted all five boys, ‘my boys’. The tragedies, however, do not end here. George Llewelyn Davies, Barrie’s favourite, died in 1915 in the trenches and Michael to whom Barrie was also very close died in 1921 by drowning, but it was rumoured that it was suicide. Thus, Barrie was left alone in the end. But unlike Peter Pan, the gay and heartless character for whom ‘to die will be an awfully big adventure’ (Barrie, 1991 [1911], p. 152), Barrie suffered terribly. Peter Llewelyn Davies writes after George’s death:

Oh miserable Jimmy. Famous, rich, loved by a vast public, but at what a frightful private cost. Shaken to the core—whatever dark fancies may have lurked at the back of his queer fond mind—…. prostrated, ravaged and utterly undone when Sylvia pursued Arthur to the grave; and only after 40 years George, whom he had loved with such a deep, strange, complicated, increasing love …
(Birkin, 1980, p. 243)

In his use of the term ‘dark fancies’ Peter Llewelyn Davies refers to the intense and passionate relationship Barrie had with George (and also with Michael), a relationship Peter seem to imbue with darker passions. In Barrie’s last letter of the over 2,000 daily ones he had written to George he says:

more and more wishing you were a girl of 21 instead of boy, so that I could say the things to you that are now always in my heart
(Birkin, 1980, p. 241)

This is just one example of how Barrie’s letters not only speak of affection for these boys but how they were mingled with a yearning, a romantic intensity, a hint of hunger, of never quite getting enough.

Do these letters come from the pen of a paedophile? When one thinks of a paedophile, one thinks of a lustful, over-the-top, drooling Nabokovian love, but that is not Barrie. Of what nature was his affection for the boys?

In his book The Little White Bird (Barrie, 2000 [1902]) Barrie draws on the emotional and I think physical inspiration gained from his relationship with George and writes the following about the little boy David who is going to stay for the night with him. David is told he is going to have an adventure.

At twenty-five past six I turned on the hot water in the bath, and covertly swallowed a small glass of brandy. I then said, ‘Half past six; time for little boys to be in bed’. I said it in the matter-of-fact voice of one made free of the company of parents, as if I had said it often before, and would have to say it often again, and as if there was nothing particularly delicious to me in hearing myself say it …
And David was deceived. To my exceeding joy he stamped his little foot, and was so naughty that, in gratitude, I gave him five minutes with a match-box. Matches, which he drops on the floor when lighted, are the greatest treat you can give David;… Then I placed
my hand carelessly on his shoulder, like one a trifle bored by the dull routine of putting my little boys to bed, and conducted him to the night nursery, which had lately been my private chamber. There was an extra bed in it tonight, very near my own, ... and scarcely less conspicuous was the new mantelshelf ornament: a tumbler of milk, with a biscuit on top of it, and a chocolate riding on the biscuit. To enter the room without seeing the tumbler at once was impossible. I had tried it several times, and David saw ... and with an indescribable emotion, I produced a night-light from my pocket and planted it in a saucer on the washstand.

David watched my preparations with distasteful levity, but anon made a noble amend by abruptly offering me his foot as if he had no longer use for it, and I knew by intuition that he expected me to take off his boots. I took them off with all the coolness of an old hand, and then I placed him on my knee and removed his blouse. This was a delightful experience, but I think I remained wonderfully calm until I came somewhat too suddenly to his little braces, which agitated me profoundly. I cannot proceed in public with the disrobing of David ...

(Then followed a description how David struggled to go to sleep in the strange environment)

Long after I had gone to bed a sudden silence filled the chamber and I knew that David had awaked. I lay motionless, and, after what seemed a long time of waiting, a little far-away voice said in a cautious whisper, 'Irene!' (his nurse)

You are sleeping with me tonight, you know David' I said

'I didn't know' he replied, a little troubled ...

Later 'Is it going on now?'

'What?'

'The adventure.'

'Yes, David'

Perhaps this disturbed him, for by and by I had to inquire, 'You are not frightened are you? ...'

David held on to my finger and said 'I am not frightened now' 'And there is nothing else you want? 

... 'I don't take up very much room', the far-away voice said. Why David' said I, sitting up, 'do you want to come into my bed?' ... 'It is what I have been wanting all the time', said I, and then without more ado the little white figure rose and flung itself at me. For the rest of the night he lay on me and across me, and sometimes his feet were at the bottom of the bed and sometimes on the pillow but he always regained possession of my finger, and occasionally he woke me to say that he was sleeping with me. I had not a good night, I lay there thinking.

Of this little boy, who, in the midst of his play while I undressed him, had suddenly buried his head on my knees ...

Of David's dripping little form in the bath, and how when I essayed to catch him he had slipped from my arms like a trout ...

(Barrie, 2000, p. 155ff)

Although this piece of Barrie's fantasy was viewed as his yearning for paternity, a careful reading of this passage might suggest other interpretations. What is obvious from the outset is that the whole sequence of events is one of seduction, a seduction into the adult's bed. What seems on the surface to be the adult's containing calming of David's anxiety is in fact a stimulation of the child's fear when he talks about the adventure when the child inquired. The adult notes 'Perhaps
this disturbed him’… and the outcome is as intended: David sleeps in his bed, leaving the adult to his dreams and fantasies about little boys, the lived experience of undressing and bathing little David, an event that so profoundly moved and also agitated him. The ‘disrobing of David’ that cannot continue in public is explicitly suggestive of a man’s sensual undressing of the woman he desires and is about to make love to. But here it stops and I assume that is why Barrie could write about it. It leaves one puzzled and wondering what is the emotional tapestry of this man’s inner world? For a start the name of the boy, David, suggests a link to his dead brother, the adored one he so desperately tried to emulate.

In his era, the time up to the turn of the century, the Victorian culture had sentimentality, a frilly, sugar-sweet view of the child but as Freud was due to discover this often co-existed with darker sexual urges. Reading between Barrie’s lines as quoted from *The little white bird* and given his childhood history it seems that he was not immune from this either.

**Perversion**

In looking at whether or not the accusations of paedophilia can be upheld, I would like to begin with his self-portrait, Peter Pan.

Peter Pan is named after the Greek God who symbolized nature, paganism, and the amoral world. He is a prepubescent boy, one who has not yet ‘eaten from the tree of knowledge’ and who, according to Barrie, has the gaiety and heartlessness he so admires in children.

Peter Pan is without parents. He left his mother by flying away at the age of seven days. He also has no father; instead he has made himself into a father, i.e. the father of the lost boys in his childhood paradise, the Neverland. There he seemingly enjoys his life, claims that he has ecstasies innumerable that other more ordinary children can never know. He is the master in a place where he lives the life of a boy who never grows up and who claims he never will, hence forever remaining the same age. In this narcissistic island of dreams and omnipotence time has no meaning; Peter Pan has escaped or so it seems, the natural rhythms of time, growth and change. Memory and reason are obsolete, make-believe and reality are made to be the same thing and the notion of the ‘other’ is obliterated. Death has no place.

This is what it seems to be but is that really so? Barrie writes that Peter

sometimes, though not often, had dreams, and they were more painful than the dreams of other boys. For hours he could not be separated from these dreams, though he wailed piteously in them. They had to do with the riddle of his existence

(Barrie, 1991 [1911], p. 181)

It emerges that behind the riddle of his existence is a motherless boy, a boy who does not know how to play, who does not know what his feelings are and anybody else’s. A kiss is something unknown as it has never been experienced, likewise touch, tenderness and warmth have never been felt. Thus, behind the omnipotent picture of triumph over need, dependency and loss is a deeply troubled boy who, so we learn, has felt betrayed and rejected by his mother. The betrayal was his replacement by another little boy, whom he found sleeping in his bed when he finally decided to return to his mother and be her little boy after all. It was too late. Watching them
both from the outside of a barred window he felt wounded, displaced and abandoned, feelings that made him confess to Wendy that he despised all mothers except her. (Barrie, 1991 [1911], p. 137)

Here, Barrie’s fiction is perhaps mirroring back his own emotional reaction to the tragedy of David’s death; the brother David who so exclusively occupied his mother’s mind and soul in his eternally young, idealized and yearned for state. Barrie in turn was barred out with the only solution to become this boy whilst deep down and perhaps unacknowledged to himself hating the mother who betrayed him so deeply. Peter Pan, like Barrie, is a tragic boy who is perpetually engulfed by an immense sense of loneliness. He is exempted from a personal reality; he is free to play an enticing variety of roles, but in the end his freedom is the freedom to be nothing, the beginning of which might lie in the 6-year-old Barrie’s effort to be David and in his early infancy.

Barrie notes in his notebook in 1907.’

Character who fails to develop normally, whose spirit remains young in an ageing body, constantly upset by the painful astonishment known to all of us when some outward proof suddenly jabs our inward conviction of perpetual youth’… Peter Pan. Ten years later—Wendy grown up and Peter still a boy
(Birkin, 1980)

His notebook entries became the ending of his book ‘Peter and Wendy’. Here he describes how the unbearable truth and reality of Wendy no longer being a girl could no longer be denied by Peter. Upon Peter’s refusal to recognize the existence of her children and her being a married and grown-up woman, Wendy turns on the light in the nursery where the scene is again taking place and picks him up. Peter cries in terror and for the first time he was afraid. What he was afraid of was the cruel shattering of an illusion, the emotional impact of the reality of adulthood and what this entails. In his lonely and parentless world sexuality and procreation has no place, there is no parental couple and the attempt to create one with Wendy had failed. He was a little boy after all.

We can see how Barrie in his creation of this omnipotent but tragic boy attempts to deal with what is truly his own predicament, i.e. his inability to love a woman, experience sexual feelings, unable to grow up. In his novel Tommy and Grizel (Barrie, 1900) which foreshadowed the making of Peter Pan, Barrie is dealing with it more explicitly. Tommy Sandys, the hero of this book, is a sentimentalist and a human chameleon, able at will to shape-shift and inhabit other people’s feelings. His own feelings, however, are hollow and flawed. Tommy manages to become a popular and successful author, while remaining helplessly immature, just like Barrie. Is this the reason why he turned to children? In his book The Little White Bird he describes the narrator’s manipulations to possess someone else’s child, the child David. This book is plainly a fantasized version of Barrie’s relationship with the Llewelyn Davies family. David is the young George, and in typical Barrie fashion the surface guise of comedy, self-mockery, and self-denigration makes possible an open declaration of almost impermissible feelings, feelings which have been interpreted as evidence of paedophilia.

**Psychoanalytic Theory of Perversion**

Limentani (1984) stresses that perversion is not an illness but a symptom. But what is it a
When looking at the body of psychoanalytic literature dealing with perversions it becomes evident that today there is clearly fading support for the theory of phallic primacy. There is doubt about penis envy and castration anxieties being the major contributing factor to the development of perversion. Instead, what has been developed is a constantly increasing awareness of the disturbed object relations in early infancy as the source of disturbances in sexuality—see Gillespie (1964), Greenacre (1968), McDougall (1972), Mancia (1993), Stoller (1986). Joyce McDougall, for example, states in 1986:

castration anxiety is nothing compared with the introjection of a damaged and frightening sense of deadness that arises in the absence of an object

Hence, behind the trauma of the mother’s missing penis lies the global shadow of the absent mother. When early separation anxieties have been traumatic, she says, there are still many possible outcomes, ranging from psychosis and psychosomatic illness to addiction and other acting out pathology. In her view the crucial mobilizing factors which set the stage for later sexual deviation arise in the true oedipal phase; the infra-structure, however, begins at the breast, followed by a long and fateful history in childhood, a history that precedes and largely determines the outcome of the developments in puberty.

The psychoanalytic literature on paedophilia is not very rich but what has been written about it follows this train of thought.

Glasser (1988) is one of the few writers whose specific focus is on the psychodynamics of paedophilia. He has observed that paedophiles experience the wish for love and intimacy as annihilatory; the fear of being taken over totally. It is felt to be too dangerous to make the identifications with parental objects, because of fear of invasion and possession. However, he also notes that paedophilia is a highly complicated psychopathology and that one cannot easily do justice to the multitude of various aspects of this form of pathology.

Drawing from his many years of experience as the Director of the Portman Clinic in London, he postulated the ‘Core-Complex’, a complex of inter-related components established in early infancy and which he sees at the centre of the psychodynamic structure of the paedophile.

Very briefly, there are two components: one component is aggression in response to perceived threat and is hence concerned with survival. The other component is a profound longing for complete merging with the object. However, since the object is invariably regarded as engulfing, the fear of annihilation, the loss of separate identity follows in its wake. One of the reactions to this threat is self-preservative aggression directed against the very object that is yearned for intimacy and the gratification of his needs for security and containment. This poses irreconcilable conflicts. The pervert’s solution to this is the employment of sexualization which converts aggression to sadism. Here, the intention to destroy is converted into the wish to hurt and control. In this way the object is preserved and the viability of the relationship is ensured, albeit in sado-masochistic terms. (Glasser, 1986, 1988)

Another way of dealing with the threat of annihilation is withdrawal. However, this solution will inflict total emotional isolation with its attendant feelings of complete deprivation and abandonment. Furthermore, the only focus for the aggression initially directed towards the
annihilating object is the self and depression follows.

There are also identity problems. The process of making an identification is not available to the pervert because of his terror of invasion and being annihilated; he cannot afford to take the object inside himself (Glasser, 1986; Mancia, 1993; Stoller, 1986). There is also often the absence of what we might call a ‘good-enough’ father with whom to make an identification as an alternative to the mother. Hence, what we often see in perverts is a widespread use of simulation, an act of pseudo-identification.

Chasseguet-Smirgel (1974) discusses the idealization of pregenital sexuality as a hallmark of the perversions. This idealization is possible because of the loss of reality in perversions which manifests itself partly in the denial of differences between the sexes which is intrinsically linked to the denial of difference between generations and at the same time of all differences. The little boy feels, that he, the little prepubescent boy with his little penis and his pregenital sexuality has no need to identify with father who has been absent, fallen und uninvolved anyway. Hence, there is an analogy between the pervert and the magician. Barrie, for example, uses words to fascinate; in Chasseguet-Smirgel’s words:

he makes us share for an instant the illusion that the range of possibilities has been stretched out to infinity. Neither absence, psychic pain nor death exist any longer. What is finally juggled away and mastered is difference itself, the difference between large and small, dead and alive, complete and lacking, between being and nothingness.

(p. 531)

Underneath the gloss of omnipotence, however, there is a deep sense of masculine inadequacy due to being firmly locked to an inner image as a child (Glasser, 1988). The paedophile has never grown up which is the hallmark of any narcissistic personality disorder. What can be observed instead is that he remains intensely engaged in his childhood relationship with his parents. It is as if he has never passed through adolescence, the often painful process through which an adult self-image is acquired.

Barrie’s dream cited in the beginning of this paper is testimony to that predicament, i.e. the warding off of a female, his mother, whom he perceived to engulf him. He defended against the catastrophe of fusion or possession by narcissistic withdrawal, self-preservation and domination and control of his objects, a ‘Peter Pan, master of the Neverland solution’. Here he created an environment where he was seemingly totally defended against pain and loss, but he also knew it did not work as it becomes evident not only in his dreams but also in his encounter with the grown-up sexual woman the sight of whom he could not bear. Behind the image of the engulfing female is also her sexuality, the evidence of other children, her children as well as the father and father’s penis which can replenish the woman and make babies, something his little pre-genital one cannot do. Hence stealing other people’s children is a magic solution and the doing away with the parental couple altogether another, something that so chillingly came true with the Llwellyn-Davies family.

Interestingly, in the story of Peter Pan is a triumph of a sexless young boy over a virile grown-up man, Hook. However, this man is a tragic and rather ghastly creation who knew no peace and whose soul was in torment. This Hook is not a woman’s man, he is a pirate who is out to murder Peter Pan. One can perhaps speculate that due to Barrie’s need to split and project, he has created in Hook a nasty piece of projective identification he attempts to defeat. Although Hook is someone who is out to haunt him, ready to get him, he never succeeds. Instead of Peter Pan it
is Hook who is being persecuted by the reality of time, depicted in the devouring and biting 'crocodile of time' image that finally gets Hook.

Barrie turned to boys and remained a boy, but did he commit the paedophilic act itself? There is no evidence that Barrie did this. Estela Welldon (1996) writes that fantasies about perverse actions do not qualify as perversion. True sexual perversion always involves the actual use of the body, a view endorsed by Glasser (1986). The sexual act of the pervert is always one of self-assertion and exploitation and devaluation of the object. This use of sexuality differentiates the perversions from the other character-disorders, where instead of the pervert’s exploitation of sexual potency, we encounter impotence.

Barrie was impotent according to Mary, his wife. One can perhaps assume that by being impotent, Barrie defended himself not only against being engulfed and annihilated but also against what his full-blown sexuality might have been able to do to the object he truly desired, i.e. boys, the Llewelyn Davies boys. Barrie seems to have chosen withdrawal from intimacy, both sexual and emotional and with it chose emotional isolation and its outcome, severe depression, his hard-to-bear, dark and unpredictable moods, which could last for days and weeks. This view of his innocence is perhaps endorsed by Nico Llewelyn Davies when he wrote

I am 100% certain there was never a desire to kiss (other than the cheek!), though things obviously went through his mind — often producing magic … All I can say for certain is that I … never heard one word or saw one glimmer of anything approaching homosexuality or paedophilia; had he had either of these leanings in however slight a symptom I would have been aware. He was innocent — which is why he could write Peter Pan.

(Birkin, 1980, p. 130)

Barrie managed to seduce and amaze the spectator, the listeners and the readers with his virtuosity, his ingenuity and his cleverness in his creation. He really did succeed at the time and still succeeds today in being the magician who is able to make a prepubescent boy triumph over the parental couple and the father as the creator. He is seductive and has survived the test of time so far.

Why?

Could it be that Barrie in his creation of Peter Pan echoes our own longings for the illusion of omnipotence and also for the triumph over our own feelings of pain, helplessness and dependency needs, our own anxieties and the inevitable passage of time and death?

Perhaps Freud can have the last word here. He said in 1908

… our actual enjoyment of an imaginative work proceeds from a liberation of tensions in our minds. It may even be that not a little of this effect is due to the writer’s enabling us thenceforward to enjoy our own day-dreams without self-reproach or shame.

(Freud, 1908)
I would like to thank Joan Fordyce, Dr. Jenny Harvey and in particular Peter Hannaford for their generosity in supplying me with relevant and out-of-print books.

References

Robert Cunningham & Sons Ltd., London.

BARRIE, J.M. (1900). *Tommy and Grizel.*
Cassel and CoLtd., London.

BARRIE, J.M. (1925). *Margaret Ogilvy by her son.*
Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., London.

Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Canongate Classics, Edinburgh.


GLASSER, M. (1986). 'Identification and its vicissitudes as observed in the perversions'.

*Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy,* 3, pp. 121–35.

GREENACRE, M.D. (1968). 'Perversions—General considerations regarding their genetic and dynamic background'.


Helga Coulter
11 Oxford Street
South Yarra Victoria 3141